

Sketch

Volume 32, Number 3

1966

Article 13

A Guide to the Study of Greek Literature (A General Introduction)

Karl Schilling*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1966 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

A Guide to the Study of Greek Literature (A General Introduction)

by Karl Schilling
English, Jr.

IDENTIFICATION OF CHARACTERS

IN ANY study of Greek literature it is of great importance to learn the names of the characters. It is the only way one can really tell them apart. If the literature of the time is any indication of the sort of people the ancient Greeks were, it is safe to say they were the most homogeneous race that ever walked the face of the earth. Within any given work, every Greek, of high or low stature, hero or villain, male or female, speaks in precisely the same way; they are god-like or goddess-like in appearance, the men have strong but eloquent voices, and the women have cow's eyes and white arms. The Greek gene pool was the simplest ever known, and all characteristics were sex-linked. Any ancient Greek couple could be sure that if their child was a boy he would be god-like with a strong but potentially good-sounding voice; a girl would have cow-eyes and white arms.

A great misunderstanding arose in the earliest phase of Greek scholarship which came from the supposition that phrases like god-like were "heroic epithets" that is, a means of identifying a specific character. This mistake has persisted so that even today one finds otherwise well educated men claiming that god-like had that use. This could hardly be the case. Homer refers to god-like Paris, god-like Achilles, god-like Hector, god-like Odysseus, and so on. Modern scholars agree that so common a title could have no such purpose of identification or description but was more probably a convention of the time, similar to our own convention of referring to acquaintances as Mr. So and So. A similar but tentative decision has been made regarding white-armed as the Greek form of Miss. There is however a small but impor-

tant group of scholars who argue that cow-eyed is really more important. A final decision awaits further study.

There is, however, a convention used which was developed by the Greeks as a means for both identification and for lending credibility to the characters, the convention being genealogy. Nearly every character in Homer at least, comes complete with a list of relatives which includes his parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts, first and second cousins, and even a relative or two by the left hand. Each relative is described in varying detail. This device has unfortunately fallen into disuse. Modern writers tend to describe a character and leave him on his own. But now much more real their characters would be if a genealogy were given each! One could say, "Joe, whose father was Mike, whose grandfather was William (who had a peg leg), whose aunt was Mildred (of Duluth, who had arthritis), got up one morning. . . etc." How much more real such a Joe would be! But moderns refuse to use this device. It's a shame. Not only would all characters be well established, every modern reader would soon develop the memory of a great-grandmother.

GREEK HEROISM

The next topic is that of Greek heroism. Now there is a simple formula which if kept in mind will serve as a fairly accurate guide as to how heroic a given character will act in a given situation. The formula: "The heroism of a Greek character varies in direct proportion to the advantage he has over his adversary." Therefore Achilles is naturally the most heroic of the Greeks being invincible from tip to ankle. With a good pair of boots on he was bravery itself. Hector also was heroic, (he had a good set of armor and was strong enough to throw a rock of such size that two ordinary men couldn't pick the rock up and put it in a cart), until he met Achilles for their famous duel; then, having no advantage, he ran. (It should be inserted that Hector did meet with Achilles once before, but at that time he thought the fight would be purely in the hands of the gods. It was. Hector was slipped away.) He ran until he thought he had an advantage. Athena, a goddess friend of Achilles, posed as Hector's brother and told him he would help out. When Hector thought it would

be two against one he became more heroic and faced Achilles. Hector did break the general rule finally by charging when he knew no one was going to help, but he thought he was doomed anyway. He was right again. But the death of Hector brings us to an interesting but seldom talked about literary device.

THE WHISKING-AWAY TECHNIQUE

Now since Hector was the most admirable character in the *Iliad*, there had to be some way to soften the blow to the reader when Hector was killed. This was done with unmatched genius. Before this battle were several important ones that came to nothing. Atlas and Hector fought to a draw and then gave each other presents; Achilles fought with Aeneas, but as soon as Aeneas was in trouble, he was covered by a mist and whisked away. Hector was also covered by a thick mist and whisked away from Achilles once. After about so much of this, it's such a relief to see someone win or lose, one almost forgets that the loser was one of the few halfway noble men.

But whisking-away was a favorite Greek literary device, it was used freely not only in the *Iliad* but in *Medea*, for instance. In that play, Zeus comes down with a chariot, in lieu of a thick mist, and makes off with her, saving her life. Most writers today would have felt bound to stay in keeping with the action of the play but the Greeks didn't feel so limited. There are only a few contemporary or near contemporary minds who have seen fit to keep alive the Greek tradition of *deus ex machina*: the creators of the movie serials, *The Perils of Pauline* and *Captain Video*, and the creator of James Bond with Bond's rocket belt and his sky hook. (James Bond by the way is nothing more than the modern counterpart of Odysseus. Wipe off Bond's lear and he's the same character. Can we ever thank Homer enough?) Anyway one can say the Greeks were the inventors of the whisking-away technique, and probably had the first air traffic problem.

OUR GREEK HERITAGE

Finally, I would just like to bring to my readers' attention the great heritage we have from the Greeks. From Aristotle alone, we have the standard criteria for what rules can be

broken and still leave a good play, his conclusions as to the number of teeth women have (fewer than men), what direction the wind should be in order to conceive a healthy child (northwest), why some babies turn out to be a girl babies (they didn't have the energy to be boy babies) and a cure for insomnia in elephants (rubbing their shoulders with salt, olive oil, and warm water). Many modern characters are copied from the Greek: James Bond has been mentioned; from Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, we get Froggie the Gremlin (his magic twanger is an updated version of a Greek lute), from the *Tales of the Golden Ass*, we get Francis the Talking Mule; from Hercules, Superman (master of the Greek whisking-away technique), and so on *ad infinitum*.

The Greek contribution to our life and culture has indeed been so pervasive that no one can be considered worthy of the adjective "educated" unless he had read and learned to love even the shabbiest works of the great Greeks. (It's also a good test of one's manly endurance.) My hope is that my reader will now have a useful guide to Greek literature in my small essay, and that his enjoyment and understanding of the Greek literature will be somewhat enriched thereby.

Cinquain

David Overby

English, Sr.

Glass-like
 Mirror water
 Lies coally reflecting
 Looks back at you as frightened eyes
 Widen